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Creating A Conversational Context Through Video

Blogging. A Case Study of Geriatric1927.

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Abstract

Web-based communication technologies such as YouTube can provide opportunities for social contact, especially between older and younger people, and help address issues of social isolation. Currently our understanding of the dynamics of social interaction within this context (particularly for older people) is limited. Elaborating upon this understanding will make it possible to proactively facilitate and support this form of intergenerational social contact. This study focuses on the experiences of an eighty year old video blogger (vlogger), Geriatric1927, and a video dialogue that develops between himself and three of his younger viewers on a particular topic. Through a multimodal interactional analysis, we show how vloggers create a conversational context between one another through the YouTube website. In particular we describe how vloggers use different *communicative modes* to establish eye contact, take turns in conversation, share embodied gestures, share their understandings and negotiate simultaneous audiences. Despite a disconnected and ambiguous sense of the *other*, YouTube is able to facilitate a conversational context in which common ground is shared and social contact and intergenerational communication can occur.

Keywords: multimodal interaction; YouTube; vlogging; conversation, intergenerational communication

1. Introduction

The socio-demographics of the developed world have changed dramatically over the last century with life expectancy rising across the globe from 47 years in 1950-1955 to 65 years in 2000-2005 (UN, 2007). Within developed societies there are lower fertility rates and alterations to family structures which undermine traditional sources of support within these ageing societies. The notion of ‘family’ as a source of immediate social support has eroded within modern industrialised societies with families rarely remaining in a particular locality from generation to generation (Abrams, 1978; Silverstein and Bengtson, 1993; UN, 2007). Older people are now more likely to live separated from family and friends and risk being more socially isolated than ever before (McCarthy and Thomas, 2004).

Web 2.0 technologies such as YouTube, with their emphasis on greater openness, collaboration and participation, could potentially address issues of social isolation by providing greater opportunities for online social interaction and enabling a wider sense of involvement in society (O’Reilly, 2005). They are particularly relevant to the older generation because of these attributes but their use amongst this group remains a minority activity. Figures about Internet use in the UK show that only 52% of those aged between 55 and 64 go online whilst a mere 15% of those over 65 years do (Livingstone et al, 2005). Similar minority figures are apparent in the US (Fox, 2004) and across Europe (EC, 2007). The reasons for this poor uptake of the Internet amongst the older population are multifaceted but can be summarised as pertaining to physical, cognitive and social obstacles inherent in the design and use of web technologies. The design of web technology tends to favour the younger generation who are seen as early adopters and the most likely consumers of it

(Coleman, 2001). Older generations can be at a distinct disadvantage when confronted with these technologies (Coyne and Nielsen, 2002). This is in terms of the fine motor skills needed to coordinate onscreen movements, the knowledge of terms and conventions implicit in web navigation and the exploratory approach needed to explore and make sense of web-based functionality (Chadwick-Dias et al, 2004). Similarly the anticipated social dynamics for web technologies are those that operate amongst peers within the predominant age groups rather than those which might operate amongst older people or across generations. As the social benefits of web technologies are not focussed on the older population there is unsurprisingly an expressed reluctance amongst them to engage with such technologies (Selwyn et al, 2003).

Older people's encounters with personal computers are often tainted by earlier experiences of them as work machines during their working lives. Subsequent engagement with computer technology therefore becomes related to work oriented tasks once retired (Goodman, 2003) or is dismissed as irrelevant (Selwyn et al, 2003). The emerging social opportunities provided by computers connected to the Internet are either not apparent to older people or not seen as relevant to their lives. Motivating them to engage with new web-based technologies can therefore be problematic. Despite the motivational and usability issues a number of studies have shown that online social contact can have a positive impact on quality of life for older people, assuaging feelings of loneliness and social isolation (Czaja et al., 1993; White et al, 1999; Wright, 2000; Fokkema and Knipscheer, 2007). Online relationships can allow older people to widen their social circle, providing them with companionship in a manner which supports independence and equality in relationships (Wright, 2000).

An issue of importance is the way in which rudimentary Internet use is transformed into meaningful social contact. This is neither straightforward nor inevitable and to a large extent depends upon the intent of those communicating. It is also influenced by the ability of the technology to mediate the communication in a way which is congruent with this intent, often informed consciously or unconsciously by face-to-face experiences. This impact is important to account for. Here we are particularly concerned with the practice of video blogging (or vlogging) that is emerging via social media websites and how this can be used to mediate social contact and conversation, especially in an intergenerational context. In the following section we review technology mediated conversations more generally, noting that while there is an extensive body of work in this area, there is little dealing with vlogging, or the use of YouTube, as a communicative medium. We go on then to describe the case study that forms the focus of this paper. The case is made of a YouTube video contribution from an older vlogger and three video responses to this by younger participants. Through a multimodal interactional analysis, we identify different communicative modes through which these participants were able to create a conversational context despite the constraints of the medium. We then go on to reflect more generally about why such conversations might work specifically within an intergenerational context.

Hence the contributions from this paper are twofold: 1. The findings around communicative modes can be of interest to vlogging as a form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in general; 2. The intergenerational specifics of this case further point to the potential for such Web 2.0 technologies to support intergenerational social contact.

1.1 Mediated conversations

In face to face situations, conversation is often a route to getting to know more about other people and establishing a level of social intimacy. Fruitful conversations arise when those communicating are able to establish a shared understanding (Clark, 1992) and an ongoing commitment to communicate. Some of the many features that play an important part in developing such understanding include being co-located in space and time, being fully embodied, having easy access to linguistic and paralinguistic information, and being able to engage in dynamic repair work whilst talking. All contribute to conversations being “highly coordinated activities [...] [consisting] of collective acts performed by participants working together”. (Clark and Schaefer, 1989).

When conversations are mediated through technological media they are affected in varying ways by the changes in social, physical and/or temporal cues which would normally aid the coordination of talk and establishment of shared understanding. There is a vast literature around computer-mediated communication (CMC), which explores the communicative affordances of different media and the tactics that people enlist to make full use of them.

Perhaps the most obvious conversational technology is the telephone. It offers *synchronous* audio communication over great distance but suffers from the absence of visual cues. Conversational intimacy is maintained on the phone through an accentuated use of speech coordination and overt speech gestures (Hutchby, 2001). Online text-based forms of communication have even fewer paralinguistic and visual cues. Email for instance offers a text-only form of *asynchronous* distributed interaction, similar to paper mail in its extended turn taking but with more compressed

timeframes (e.g., Tyler and Tang, 2003). Other text based environments, such as instant messaging (IM) (e.g., Avrahami and Hudson 2006; Nardi et al 2000) and online discussion groups (e.g., Ludford et al, 2004) enable more *semi-synchronous* distributed conversations, with varying degrees of persistence. The lack of paralinguistic and visual cues has led, for example to the emergence of emoticons to reinstate aspects of emotional content (Yuasa et al, 2006; Hancock et al, 2007) and including history in chat for conversational grounding (Gergle et al, 2004).

Blogs offer a different form of text-based communication, broadcasting text entries or *posts* to the whole Internet in a manner akin to a radio show (Nardi et al, 2004). Blogs emphasise current posts by arranging them all in reverse chronological order. They are predominantly used to impart up to date information about oneself (like an online diary), an organisation or a topic of interest (Nardi et al, 2004). They can also facilitate interpersonal *asynchronous* communication through the use of reciprocal comments, links or blog posts and these traits suggest the emergence of a conversational context (Herring et al, 2005). Video blogs (vlogs) maintain a similar broadcast model to their textual cousins but use online video as their principle medium. Vlogs support similar purposes, providing opportunities for interpersonal use of *asynchronous* communication by allowing reciprocal video and/or chat responses.

Studies of *synchronous* video communication have highlighted the disparities with face to face communication which affect conversations, namely the re-orchestration of gaze and turn taking (e.g., Sellen 1995) and the difficulties of sharing physical context when engaged in distributed collaborative work (e.g., Fussell et al, 2003; Gaver et al 1993). To date however, there is no work establishing if and how

conversations are performed in an *asynchronous* video blogging space such as YouTube.

A number of theories have been developed to explain the mediating effects of technology on conversation. Media richness theory (Daft and Lengel, 1984) uses the 'richness' of media to account for its effectiveness in conveying information. Within this theory text is seen as lean media whilst video is rich and hence more effective for communication. More ambiguous and complex tasks are deemed as requiring richer media. Social presence theory (Short et al, 1976) highlights the degree to which a medium can re-present a communicator to others in terms of acoustic, visual and/or physical indicators. The importance of these different re-presentations is taken in lieu of their social value such that text-only forms of communication are seen as the least social whilst multiple sensory channels are seen as providing greater social presence.

In both these theories, face-to-face is deemed to be the richest and most social medium and a departure point for all mediated communications. What these theories tend to ignore is the impact of human agency on the communicative process which can reorient communication through alternative means so that similar aims are still achieved. More recent theoretical perspectives have attempted to acknowledge the extent of this human communicative adaptation through a social information processing model (Walther, 2007), showing that social cognition can be comparable in depth to face to face whilst taking longer to achieve. Multimodal perspectives take this one step further arguing that all communication is mediated whether through technological or other semiotic means, i.e. there is essentially no difference between what we see in CMC and face to face communication (Norris, 2004).

Here we are particularly concerned with some computer-mediated conversations that happened over a Web 2.0 application, YouTube, and the

multimodal interactions that take place there. While the YouTube tagline is ‘Broadcast Yourself’, and the formal structure that it uses to present users’ videos online makes it a suitable vehicle for vlogging, it can also be described as a social networking site (Boyd and Ellison, 2007) which uses video as a primary source for establishing online social connections. YouTube vlogging is similar to video conferencing in terms its media richness and its degree of social presence, but is asynchronous rather than real time. It enables both text and video responses, hence also similar to text blogs, email and mail in its more extended interactional time frames. Unlike video conferencing and email however, YouTube’s video communication is based on a broadcast model where communication originates from one person but is made available to a largely unknown audience.

In more detail, YouTube¹ was started in 2005 as a site where people could upload, view and share video clips. It has promoted itself as an alternative broadcast medium and incorporates notions from the one-way televisual experience, using slogans such as “Broadcast Yourself” and directing users to different “Channels” and “Featured Videos”. However its purpose remains user-defined and social in nature with social capital underpinning its success. Peripheral involvement in the YouTube community is possible through the viewing and sharing of content but the opportunities for social interaction become apparent once users sign up as members of the community. Social connections within YouTube can be initiated by responding to posted videos through subscription or by sending text or video responses. At its simplest level these measures provide mechanisms for giving feedback on videos, beyond this they provide opportunities for conveying messages of a more personal nature. Within YouTube the reciprocal practice of responding to others’ vlogs with

one's own vlog has developed, highlighting the potential of vlogging as a communication medium in its own right. It is this practice that is the focus of this study.

Our interest here is on how a conversational context is established in this new Web 2.0 medium where support for online interactions goes beyond text and includes visual and audio channels, and where the model of communication is primarily one of broadcast rather than conversation. In a similar way to social presence theory, we look to identify multiple *communicative modes* which could normally be used in face to face communication to convey meaning and which are available through this medium. In contrast to social presence theory and in accordance with a multimodal interactional perspective these modes are viewed not as fixed discrete channels of communication dictated by the technology but as dynamic communicative actions enlisted in varying degrees by those communicating to assist mutual understanding, i.e. the human agency perspective. As such body movement, posture, gestures, intonation of voice, the use of silence, the layout of a room all come into play as coexistent aspects of the communication and hence form the basis for a conversational context. This study explores the multimodal interactions that take place through YouTube's video-to-video communication through a case study of intergenerational dialogues involving 'Geriatric1927'.

2. Previous study

The current study builds on earlier work which looked at the appearance on YouTube of a 79 year old vlogger called Peter and the dialogue that developed

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Youtube> provides an overview of YouTube, last

between himself and his younger viewers during his first eight videos (Harley and Fitzpatrick, 2008). Peter, or Geriatric1927 as he named himself on YouTube, started to use the YouTube service in August 2006 posting small video vignettes about his life and commenting on certain news items. Since that time, as at 30th June 2008², he has posted 133 videos and his ‘channel’ on YouTube has been visited 2,173,508 times with 47,618 of these visitors signing up as dedicated subscribers to his videos. The profile and popularity gained by Geriatric1927³ in this ‘young people’s’ medium, and later in the popular press worldwide (e.g., BBC News⁴ and CNN⁵), provides a unique opportunity to explore how web 2.0 technologies such as YouTube might be able to support social connectivity for older people. Since that time he has managed to establish an ongoing rapport with his younger viewers primarily through the co-creation of a narrative based upon his own life history.

The previous study took a grounded textual approach to analysing the content of the video and text based interactions and showed that YouTube provided good support for intergenerational communication allowing opportunities for reminiscence, reciprocal learning and a co-creation of content. The current study continues to trace the evolution of Peter’s role within the YouTube community and explores how different media and *communicative modes* are employed as part of the communication that emerges there. Since the earlier study Peter’s role has developed beyond that of story teller, with his viewers requesting explicit advice about their own life situations. This study looks at how Peter engages in a public dialogue with his viewers using different communicative modes, in response to one particular request.

accessed June 30 2008.

² All figures given in this study relate to this date unless stated otherwise.

³ Wikipedia listed Geriatric1927 as 48th most subscribed YouTube contributor and 26th most subscribed director on YouTube - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YouTube>.

⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/6365389.stm>

3. Methods

This study investigates the multimodal aspects of YouTube exploring the ways in which different communicative modes are used to establish a conversational context. Implicit in this study is a phenomenological stance which seeks to understand how those communicating come to experience and make sense of themselves and one another. In order to go beyond the grammatical content of the dialogue the study employs a multimodal interactional analysis which is inspired by the semiotics-based methodological framework devised by Norris (2004) which in turn builds on the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001). This maintains a phenomenological emphasis and is grounded in the video data.

The analysis focuses on a particular video made by Peter in September 2007, entitled “TEENAGERS AND DRUGS” that responds directly to a message sent to him through the YouTube messaging system. This video was chosen as its title suggested an overt attempt by Peter to engage with the younger generation and it allowed teenagers to self select themselves in response. The fact that Peter received three video responses from teenagers implied that this was also a successful attempt.

As stated previously, YouTubers responded in a number of ways: through ‘open’ text comments posted onto the website in response to videos; through direct ‘closed’ text messages sent to the person who posted the video; or as ‘open’ video comments posted as responses to the original video. In this study the focus is on the video-to-video aspect of the dialogue. In all there were six video responses (as of 3/10/07). Three of these, all entitled “Re: Teenagers and Drugs”, were direct

⁵ *CNN Connects: Our Networked World* (2007). CNN, 26th January at 0330 IST

responses to Peter's discussions and these were used as the basis for analysis with respect to establishing a conversational context. Permission was gained from all authors for use of their videos and names in the reporting of this study along with parental consent where necessary.

Together these videos allow us to conduct a multimodal interactional analysis of this dialogue to examine how these YouTubers establish and maintain a conversational dialogue on this topic. Multimodal interactional analysis acknowledges the different ways in which meaning is conveyed in communication beyond the sole use of language. Examination of the video therefore gives a fine grained, holistic account of interaction which incorporates not only language but also body posture, gestures, layout of filmed settings, the sound qualities of speech, editing of the video, etc; in fact anything that is used to convey meaning through YouTube's visual medium. Multimodal interactional analysis shows how vloggers through their actions, structure the awareness of their viewers by directing their attention towards particular aspects of the interaction and hence signify conversational intent.

As an analytic process this is inherently interpretive and in order to maintain a phenomenological stance throughout analysis, participants were further contacted via YouTube to clarify that the researcher's interpretations of their multimodal communications were in agreement with their original intent. Also as part of this stance, and through both studies, we have built an ongoing relationship with Peter and will draw on understandings from face-to-face and online interviews and discussions with him over the course of 2 years.

Translating the non-linguistic, multimodal aspects of dialogue into static printed form as part of the transcription process is problematic. This study attempts to recreate the experience of these interactions for the reader by taking a descriptive

approach and elaborating upon the potential avenues for communication through multimodal dialogue. Drawing on related CMC literature, and through analysis of the data, we identified a number of different communicative modes that were used by the vloggers in this study. These can be organised into the following broad categories: use of the physical setting or layout (arrangement of the room); manipulation of physical objects (arrangement or movement of objects in the field of view); body movement (postures, hand gestures, head movements, etc.); video production techniques (editing of footage, titles, recorded music or on-screen timers); speech and vocal gestures (spoken language, intonation, reading and/or laughter) and other sounds (recorded music, recorded speech and/or noise from the surrounding environment).

Consistent with a grounded approach, this list is not exhaustive of all possibilities for communicative modes but represents the major categories in the current data set. A table at the beginning of the description of each video summarises key characteristics and modes. To present the data, still frame images from the video are used to highlight the use of the different modes, along with the accompanying transcript. The transcription conventions are borrowed from conversation analysis (ten Have, 1999) and have been adapted to incorporate the more extensive multimodal perspective (Norris, 2004). Along with accepted conventions⁶, the transcribed speech is annotated to show periods of camera eye contact in **bold**, and notes about observable actions in bracketed *italics*; the vloggers are identified in the transcripts by the first initial of their first name.

⁶ Speech conventions: (n) pause noted in seconds; = joining of words; : an extension of the preceding syllable; ↑↓ rising or falling intonation for subsequent utterance; underlined text indicates spoken with particular vocal energy; - a sudden cut off to an utterance; ? a rising tone; . a falling tone; , a shifting continuous tone bridging utterances

4. Conversations around ‘Teenagers and Drugs’

There follows a description of the four videos, starting with Peter’s video then followed by his three respondents. We describe the modes used by the different vloggers in their videos. Aspects of the multimodal dialogue pertinent to establishing a conversational context are then identified and described in detail. We start with Peter’s video and then move on to the three responses. All the videos follow a similar ‘talking heads’ style of delivery typical of vlogging in which the person talks directly to a static camera.

4.1. Video 1 – Teenagers and drugs.

Video title	TEENAGERS AND DRUGS			
YouTube username	Geriatric1927			
Country of origin	United Kingdom			
Number of views	30,623			
Number of comments	Text	429	Video	6
Length of video	6 minutes 37 seconds			
Video production elements	No titles or editing			
Modes used	Physical layout/setting; hand gestures; manipulation of objects (printed email, wristwatch and glasses); reading of written text; spoken language; laughter.			

In this first video, Peter (Geriatric 1927) is responding to a message sent to him through the YouTube message system. Peter sits facing his computer and addresses his camera. He has placed particular objects in the background so that they can be clearly seen whilst he is talking. There is a drawn portrait of him stuck to the wall, a toy bear and a miniature motorbike, however Peter does not refer to these in any way during the video. After initially greeting his YouTube audience he goes on to

read out the message that he has received and printed out onto a piece of paper, as shown in excerpts 1 and 2.

Excerpt 1:



Note: background objects highlighted

00:00:02 P: **Hello YouTubers** well first of all the title isn't er using the well tried and popular method of er getting views to **one's videos** by: a catchy title it comes from: erm a letter **from a young man** in Thailand who is a schoolboy=I believe he's aged fifteen but that's not relevant=he is the editor or producer of **a school** ↑newspaper and he has asked Geriatric if he will **answer** some questions to pose in his newspaper and I'm: reading his question (*picks up the piece of paper he has in front of him*)

Excerpt 2:



00:43:00

P: his question says teenagers more regularly have contact with drugs and alcohol despite **laws preventing this** do you believe that it is enty- sorry, (*starts to emphasise speech by waving his left hand up and down*) do you believe



00:56:23

P: that it is entirely up to them to make their own choices (*continues waving left hand up and down to emphasise speech*)



01:01:43

P: or should their parents? have the final say, what would you advise to those that do enjoy experimenting with drugs (*stops emphasising speech with left hand*) and consuming alcohol at this age.



01:12:17

(Peter puts the letter down, stops reading and starts responding to the question)

Peter emphasises the question posed to him by enunciating the words with great clarity and by simultaneously moving his left hand up and down as he speaks. Peter follows the letter reading by engaging in some brief discussion about the topic but then he chooses not to give direct advice to teenagers. Instead he asks a number of his own questions which he has already prepared. He explains that he has done this to prompt some thought and to continue the debate with others. The following excerpt shows some of his questions.

Excerpt 3:



03:46:36

P: do you want to disappoint? your parents by bad behaviour
(3.1) **erh do you think that you will** lose friends by not
be:ing one of the in=crowd and not be:ing **regarded** as
coo:l: (1.8) if so do you think that these people? are really?
true friends (2.1)

Peter pauses after each question. He concludes the video by explaining that he will not be making videos for YouTube in the near future as he will be busy with other things and says goodbye.

4.2. Video Response 1- Tim

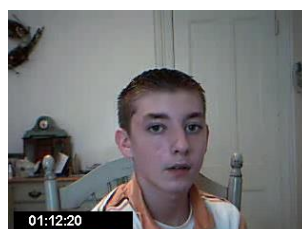
Video title	Re: Teenagers and Drugs			
YouTube username	iceaquarius92			
Age	15			
Country of origin	United States of America			
Number of views	1,428			
Number of comments	Text	25	Video	0
Length of video	7 minutes 59 seconds			
Video production elements	No titles or editing.			
Modes used	Physical layout/setting (living room); listening; disembodied recorded speech (Peter); head movements; body orientation; on screen timer; spoken language.			

Tim (iceaquarius92) made his video in his living room sitting in a dining room chair. In the background there is a sideboard and a phone attached to the wall. He starts the video by explaining that he is responding to Peter's questions as a teenager and uses a particular technique to do so: he replays portions of the video on his computer so that the questions can be heard one by one, stopping the replay after each question to respond to them in his own video. His computer is just out of view of his webcam to Tim's left hand side and he addresses the camera as he speaks. His answers are brief and to the point. This is illustrated in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 4:



00:52:10 T: I want toa: have them play and be able to answer each one. **so here's the first question he asks ah teenagers** about how they feel about alcohol and drugs and **I hope you can see me** I don't have the camera thing (points with his eyes at the camera) up right now.



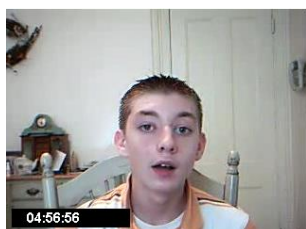
01:12:20 P: (starts playing Peter's video on the computer) **Do you want? to be out of out of control of your own actions, beha-**(stops playing video) (partly orients his body to the replaying video, and holds eye contact whilst listening to the video playing)



01:33:15 T: (*orients body direct to the camera*) **OK erm I know that's not the whole question but basically that's the question.** erm do I wanna be out of control of my own actions, **well of course not. I wanna enjoy myself, I wanna have a good time but, you know, I don't seek to be the one, ah you know, picked up by an ambulance crew in an alley at three am when I've been passed out for twenty minutes. that's not me and that will never be me.** (*nodding head to say no*)

Whilst listening to Peter's questions Tim turns his body to face the computer but keeps his head oriented towards the camera, staring silently at the camera with an unfocussed gaze and a relaxed jaw. This appears to indicate mutual attention to Peter's past conversational turn and at the same time to his projected YouTube audience including Peter. After listening to the questions one by one Tim orients his whole body towards the camera and responds with his own answers resuming 'normal' eye contact. At times during the video Tim repeats the questions to himself and pauses to think about them afresh, as shown in excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5:



04:56:56
T: **so (2.0) do I feel I or that they're really friends?::**

4.3. Video Response 2 - Robb

Video title	Re: Teenagers and Drugs			
YouTube username	hartnell114			
Age	18			
Country of origin	United Kingdom			
Number of views	1,124			
Number of comments	Text	14	Video	0
Length of video	8 minutes 14 seconds			
Video production elements	Introductory text titles and soundtrack. Heavily edited.			
Modes used	Physical objects (flag); disembodied music; written text (titles); editing of shots; hand gestures; spoken language.			

Robb (hartnell114) sits in his bedroom with a New Zealand flag hung behind him on the wall. The video starts with some introductory titles and some early twentieth century brass band music. The introductory titles apologise for continuity errors that occur within the subsequent video (due to editing). Robb has typed up both sets of questions (i.e. those from Peter's letter and those from Peter himself) on his computer screen which is to the right hand side of the camera, out of view. He refers to these during his video, reading the questions out loud as statements and then thinking through his response by giving a 'stream of consciousness' reply. Robb interprets Peter's video as being about whether teenagers should be in control of their own lives, and their decision to take drugs, or whether their parents should be.

Excerpt 6:



01:20:69 R: The parents, the adults they have known they have been around a lot longer, they know the effects of,



01:27:38 R: **they've seen what can happen**, they've a greater understanding than the **younger people** er would (*video edit*) so (3.0) so no I I should imagine it should be down to **the individual** it=should be the choice of the individual ahh (2.0) simp because that choice is theirs to make er if they say their yes **then that down to them** that I mean I should imagine there are a vast majority who would say ↓no and the people who've said ↓no are doing
02:03:00 R: the right thing. er (4) why are they doing the right thing?



02:10:63 R: =they're doing the right thing bec'zs:: (1.5)

Robb explores the subject with thought, trying to give a balanced account of both a teenager's and a parent's or older person's perspective. In presenting these he takes on the role of a 'third person' and the differences he describes are difficult to reconcile. At times he has to stop and think about what he personally thinks, posing questions to himself to check (see excerpt 6). Robb concludes his vlog by saying that he personally would not get involved with drugs.

4.4. Video Response 3 - Iva⁷:

Video title	Re: Teenagers and Drugs			
YouTube username	BellaTheHappyLoser			
Age	22			
Country of origin	Croatia			
Number of views	2,435			
Number of comments	Text	40	Video	0
Length of video	9 minutes 31 seconds			
Video production elements	No titles or editing.			
Modes used	Physical layout/setting; hand gestures; light; physical objects (a cigarette and a pint of beer); spoken language.			

Iva (BellaTheHappyLoser) sits at a table to make her video and her camera points up at her face and into the top corner of the room showing three different coloured walls and a movement of light and shade through a window onto the walls. No other parts of the room are visible and it is not possible to see what kind of a room it is. She starts the video by greeting Peter directly, explaining how much she has always wanted to make a video reply to him. She does not respond directly to any of Peter's questions but takes his vlog as a starting point for talking more generally about her own experiences as a teenager and her attitudes about drugs. She talks about her recreational use of drugs as a teenager and describes the corruption in her country which complicates any involvement. The emphasis of her vlog is on free will and personal choice, proposing that the legalisation of all drugs would help people to reconcile their addictive behaviour and reduce corruption.

⁷ By 30th June 2008 this video had been removed. The number of views and comments are taken from the date last accessed – 3rd October 2007

Excerpt 7:



05:52:47

I: and I think (1.3) I think we should legalise it bec'z,



05:57:68

I: then people who really want t-**I mean people who really want to use it and really wanna die and really want to-**



06:01:87

I: **↓I mean I'm smoking, this is a drug too.**



06:06:21

I: I'm **↑aware, I wanna have a ↑choice**

Throughout Iva's vlog she is drinking a glass of beer and smoking a cigarette. Consumption of these punctuates her discussion and these objects become integrated as significant props. Her deliberate gestures with them are deictic in nature, allowing her to illustrate particular points to her audience and her ongoing consumption provides pauses for her to think about the subject and her response.

At one point in Iva's vlog she re-enacts a dialogue between herself and a friend to help her clarify her own thoughts about hard drugs and to invite others to appreciate her point of view.

Excerpt 8:



07:17:39

I: my best friend erm (2.5) **he** was erm eh (1.5) **one Christmas he asked me er: Iva can you get me ↑heroin huh** (she smiles) **I mean he doesn't=he I mean I was like why? you can get addicted by that y'know and he said I really want to try it** (*drinks beer from glass*) (4.1) erm ↓**ofcourse we couldn't get it but.**

Towards the end of her vlog Iva returns to addressing Peter and ponders the differences in their perspectives and how they might behave in one another's shoes.

Excerpt 9:



08:38:16 (*points left index finger at camera and then removes it again*)

I: **and** I wanna say dis to you Peter=I don't know if you- **I mean- you are an old man anan old man an=I said to myself when I turn sixty I will try every drug, everything** (*waves left hand in front of camera*)

At the end of her vlog Iva apologises for possibly boring Peter and says goodbye to him.

5. Establishing a Conversational Context through YouTube

Even though the primary model for blogs is one of broadcast, these videos clearly show evidence of a conversation taking place: Peter was engaging in a conversational turn by responding to the initial question he had received and Tom, Robb and Iva were in turn engaging in a conversational turn with Peter. These vlogging 'conversations' are reminiscent of face to face conversations; they have the usual openings and closings (Tang, 2007) along with overt turn taking and the sharing of personal perspectives.

Face to face interactions are seen as ‘successful’ when those communicating are able to establish shared understandings or ‘common ground’ between themselves (Clark, 1992) and extensive research has shown that this ‘grounding’ occurs spontaneously and as a collaborative activity between speakers and is rooted in the ‘performance’ of speech. It is the actual performance of conversing, embedded in time and physical presence, which maintains the sense of mutual understanding and the ongoing process of conversation (Brennan, 2000). Both Bavelas et al (1997) and Nardi (2005) suggest that it is this embodied face-to-face experience that acts as a template for people communicating in mediated environments such as YouTube and that it is the constraints of the medium that force them to find ‘work-arounds’ to achieve similar conversational aims and so accomplish the same relational work.

Unlike face to face communication, vloggers have to manage with a disconnected sense of the *other* when engaging in dialogue. This means that whilst Peter’s viewers can perceive the multimodal nuances of his vlog they are unable to react to it in ‘real-time’ and have to remember their reactions for when they make their own video. Similarly there is no opportunity for them to interrupt or prompt for more information.

In a discussion of conversations over IM, Nardi et al (2000) talk about the importance of preserving a conversational context and the intermittent semi-synchronous nature of the conversation creating longer term communication zones. Vlogging similarly creates longer term communication zones but the mechanisms by which these are maintained are different by virtue of the different media and the different types of relationships being established on YouTube. IM mostly occurs between friends and colleagues whereas relationships on YouTube can be with an unknown audience whilst incorporating personal communications as well.

In the following discussion, we draw out the various ways in which the vloggers have resourcefully recreated their sense of the *other* and in turn created a conversational context in this particular medium, reinstating some of the dynamics of real-time face to face communication to accomplish relational work. In particular we discuss eye contact, turn taking, the sharing of embodied gestures, the sharing of understandings and the negotiation of simultaneous audiences.

5.1. Eye contact- mediating past and present conversational partners

Establishing mutual eye contact is an important way in which the sense of a conversation is initiated and maintained between people in face to face communication (Goffman, 1963). It provides a measure of another's agreement with one's own perspective and the sense of being 'with' someone in a conversation (Kendon et al, 1975). Vloggers must contend with a mediated substitute, which does not take place directly between eyes but is mediated across time from eye to camera and then from screen to eye. In order to navigate this mediation vloggers need to have a sense of a projected future audience or conversational partner and behave as if the camera lens is in fact someone's eyes. In the absence of the normal immediate feedback from the other person's eyes participants here must choose pertinent moments to recreate a sense of eye contact for their viewers by staring at the camera. This is clearly displayed in Peter's vlog entrée (excerpt 1) and at the beginning of all the vlogs.

Moments of eye contact are also important throughout conversation as they imply personal commitment to the communication (Kendon et al, 1975) and play an important role in providing feedback about being heard and understood (Clark and

Schaefer, 1989). Uninterrupted eye contact would normally be perceived as indicative of affection, obsessive identification or confrontation in normal face to face communications (Kendon, 1990). Hence sustained eye contact is usually avoided in vlogs and instead comes and goes throughout the conversation as a way of maintaining a sense of ongoing engagement. This can be seen in many of the examples (see excerpts 3, 6, 7 and 8). There are also examples of sustained eye contact being used by vloggers to reinforce a listening stance as a sense of conversational engagement. In Tim's video (excerpt 4) he plays Peter's video questions back in real-time so that he can respond spontaneously to them. He uses his gaze and posture to show that he is listening intently to Peter's questions.

5.2. *Turn taking*

One of the challenges for participants in this video-mediated conversation, which has longer term communication zones when compared to synchronous video-based conversations, is that the current speaker has to actively negotiate a sense of a *current* conversation because they are dealing with a conversational partner who is simultaneously *past* and anticipated *future*. The previous example of Tim (excerpt 4) illustrates the way he has negotiated this past and future version of the same partner – as stated, his eyes are looking at the camera suggesting to his projected partner that he is listening and understanding, but his body is also partly oriented to the computer to the left from which the previous conversational turn is playing, suggesting that he is simultaneously attending to the partner in the past.

This leads us to a broader exploration of turn taking. In order for spoken dialogue to be meaningful and engaging, speakers take turns. In face to face

communication this is negotiated between speaker and listener in the midst of conversation through the use of eye contact, posture, gesture and silences during speech (Duncan, 1972; Duncan, Brunner, & Fiske, 1979; Duncan & Niederehe, 1974).

The absence of a co-present *other* during conversation means that such techniques are not available to vloggers and they must creatively reconstruct the sense of turn taking in other ways. Peter, Tim, Robb and Iva have done this in very different ways but all achieve the conversational intent of turn taking. Peter prints out the email he had been sent and reads out the original question for the benefit of his future viewers and responds. Peter also uses a technique of asking explicit questions to his viewers and then pausing after each question. These pauses give space for contemplation and encourage a response from his viewers. Future turn taking is therefore anticipated and implied by such an approach.

Tim draws the past-Peter into the current conversational context by re-playing segments of Peter's original video, listening to each question then responding in turn. This is an overt and visible expression of turn taking. Robb deals with turn taking by typing Peter's questions down on his computer screen and referring to them one by one as he speaks⁸. This he does without explicit reference to what he is doing and those viewing his video are left to work out the significance of the accompanying pauses before he reads out the next question. The lack of a co-present *other* also leads to an internalisation of the turn-taking aspects of dialogue. This can be observed through the use of self-rhetorical questions which are present in all three video responses (e.g. excerpts 5 and 6) and act as surrogates for an imagined co-present other. By also responding to their own questions Robb and Tim maintain the sense of

⁸ Clarified in interview with Robb.

turn-taking for the viewer. In these varied ways, through a single video, Tim and Robb have established the effect of multiple turn-taking and conversational contributions (Clark and Schaefer, 1989) while also appearing to make a single contribution from the perspective of YouTube video responses.

Iva takes an approach to responding to Peter with a single contribution (Clark and Schaefer, 1989). This does not involve answering Peter's questions directly and she essentially takes a single 'turn', distilling what she feels is Peter's essential argument, and responding to this through her own perspective. Whilst Iva does not engage in turn-taking explicitly by responding to Peter's questions, she does re-enact a dialogue between herself and a friend (see excerpt 8) which helps her to clarify her own thoughts about hard drugs and to invite others to appreciate her point of view.

5.3. Sharing embodied gestures

The common experience of being within one's own body in the here and now as an embodied subject of experience is a constant vehicle for conveying meaning in conversation (Robertson, 1997). Most often in face to face communication this presents itself as a passive pre-reflective aspect of relating to others (Depraz, 2001) and can convey social and cognitive information (Whittaker 2003). Because video is a visual medium, the features of the embodied other are fully available to viewers so it is obvious to all that Peter is an older person and that Tim, Robb and Iva are younger people. These visual cues are unconsciously processed when developing an impression of another.

Vloggers also work to maintain this sense of embodied presence by relating to their viewers 'as if' they were physically there in front of them. By doing so, they

engender a feeling of immediacy for their viewers. For the most part this appears to be unintentional and part of merely expressing themselves. For example a mode used by Peter is that of the *beat* gesture which he uses to emphasise his spoken words in excerpt 2. This is a physical enactment of beating out a rhythm whilst speaking (Norris, 2004). This focuses attention (through mutual awareness of a repetitive movement) onto the particular tracts of his speech that he wants his viewers to listen to.

Deixis is another way in which this embodied sense of presence is communicated. Iva uses a *deictic* gesture when she presents her lit cigarette to the camera and refers to it as ‘this’. This gesture appears as she becomes consciously aware of smoking her own cigarette whilst talking about addiction. The recognition of the actuality of addictive behaviour in relation to a thing of real substance provides an opportunity for shared experience and is identified as a shared point of reference for her viewers (Clark, 1992). Presenting her cigarette to the camera she invites her viewers to consider the embodied experience of addiction rather than just its description (excerpt 7). Similarly Tim uses deixis in his vlog to refer to his camera’s output by pointing with his eyes and a nod of the head to direct his viewers’ attention, providing a shared point of reference (excerpt 4).

5.4. Sharing personal understandings – establishing common ground

As previously stated, establishing shared understandings or ‘common ground’ is a critical element of conversations (Clark 1992). However, it is clear from the videos that these YouTubers are engaged in a mutual project of self expression which does not depend upon similar viewpoints but on different ones. Common ground

exists in terms of the implicit context of sitting in front of a camera and embarking upon a YouTube vlog. Shared understandings are articulated in terms of ownership of a computer and a camera (Tim's use of deixis), an expectation of audience being world wide (Peter's response to someone from Thailand as being relevant to the whole audience; Iva's explanation of the cultural implications of living in Croatia) viewers being of a particular age (Iva's acknowledgement of Peter's age). This is in accordance with what has been called *communal* common ground (Schaefer, 1992).

Beyond this simple sense of affinity by community association, these vloggers also attempt to establish *personal* common ground (Schaefer, 1992) by tentatively inhabiting the phenomenal worlds of one another, transposing themselves there in order to explore common ground and hence make personal connections. In a broader relational sense, Nardi (2005) talks about establishing 'fields of connection' by engaging in activities that help create "feelings of connection with others for the purpose of continued interactions over time" (p92). These activities are beyond the more "straightforward manifestations such as turn taking, head nodding, conversational openings and closings" (p93). In her studies these activities included touch, eating and drinking, sharing experience in a common space (all of which require direct co-presence not available in vlogs) and informal conversation. While not playing out in the same way, we see other types of activities on YouTube that go to establishing personal common ground and create fields of connection.

In Iva's vlog she invites Peter to inhabit her phenomenal world in her discussion of taking drugs at sixty. Robb also considers the older person's viewpoint in his discussion of free will versus parental control for teenagers. These attempts at transposing themselves into the position of the *other* are "experimental" in terms of how they are thinking about the other person. Both Iva and Robb are attempting to

think ‘as if’ they were older, considering alternative perspectives independently of their own.

However there are important differences between vlogging interactions and face to face conversation with regards to the relationship between thought and the spoken word. Vloggers are expressing something about who they ‘think’ the other person is rather than who they actually are and have to assume they are being understood. In face to face conversation common ground can be more mutually and dynamically co-created (Clark and Schaefer 1989). Preconceptions and misunderstandings can be challenged or confirmed in the actual dynamic space that exists between people, often through the use of communicative modes other than language. In vlogging the conversational space that exists is in the minds of vloggers as their conceptions of one another formed by recorded video content, ‘frozen’ in time and space and must be dynamically re-connected through the performative actions of the current speaker.

5.5. Negotiating simultaneous audiences

As with media such as discussion forums, vlogging simultaneously enables direct inter-personal communication and communication to a wider audience. By virtue of placing their videos onto YouTube, each of the vloggers is aware that the video can be viewed and responded to by anyone, part of some larger unknown future viewing audience, consistent with a broadcasting model. Peter makes this explicit in his video by starting with “Hello YouTubers”, and even though he uses a private email sent to him as the basis for his content, it is clear he is talking to the broader YouTube audience. This is less clear with the three respondents however, who appear

to be primarily responding to Peter as a named conversational partner and so engaging in a more directed communication, but aware too of an extended potential YouTube audience. Vlogging therefore creates an interesting contradiction in which vloggers are simultaneously negotiating public, private and semi-private spheres. This contradiction is resolved in a couple of ways – one is through the emphasis on ‘openness’ within the participatory culture of YouTube vlogging (which encourages public disclosure of personal dilemmas) and the other is through the use of parallel communicative modes which support simultaneous communication to different audiences.

Peter makes use of the layout of his room by deliberately placing particular objects within it, to explicitly but indirectly communicating with particular individuals at the same time as engaging in a spoken dialogue with a much larger, non-specific audience. YouTube viewers have sent him a drawn portrait and a teddy bear (see excerpt 1) and by placing these objects in the field of view he is able to show the senders his appreciation of them, identifying them as cherished objects in his home, but without needing to explicitly draw attention to them⁹. Similarly the message in printed form (which Peter refers to as a letter) is used by Peter to reinforce his personal consideration of its content whilst simultaneously communicating in a public arena.

Whittaker (2003) talks about cognitive cues that we can use to make inferences about people, for example that if there is no coat on the hook in an empty office then it is likely that person has not come in yet. The physical environments we inhabit therefore convey additional information about us, information that can be exploited in the visual medium. The basic furnishings of the rooms that the

⁹ Identified in interview with Peter

participants have chosen to make their videos in convey implicit information, e.g., from the lights on Iva's wall that it is daytime and nice weather, from the wallpaper in Peter's room that it is furnished in an older style. The participants also make explicit use of the space to stage other layers of explicit communication. Robb, for example, sits in front of a flag from which it is easy to assume that he comes from New Zealand. It is through this use of 'background' and 'foreground' elements that different audiences can be simultaneously addressed.

6. Multi-modal Web 2.0 Conversations and Intergenerational Communication

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of CMC more broadly in terms of providing companionship and social support for older people (Wright, 2000) and it seems that YouTube vlogging may have similar potential. Companionship is characterised by a mutual appreciation and equality in relationships directed towards shared positive experiences whilst social support is seen as an aspect of relationships in which help is sought (Wright, 2000).

While the conversations reported here are specific to Peter's case and, like all conversations, dependent upon the intent of those involved, this study has shown that opportunities can exist for older computer users to engage in 'conversations' with the younger generation through Web 2.0 technologies, as part of reciprocal YouTube vlogging. These YouTube multilogues show aspects of both companionship and social support but emphasise the opportunities that exist for older people to give support to younger generations rather than to just receive it. This highlights an important need for older people to be able to give something back to the younger generation (Tornstam, 2005).

The vloggers in this study were intent on communicating with one another and readily engaged in behaviours which helped them to establish a conversational context despite the constraints of the medium. Indeed rather than taking the functional limitations of YouTube as inherent obstacles to communication they were creative and proactive in their attempts to convey conversational intent through other means. They did this spontaneously, adapting their modes of communication in order to ‘connect’ and communicate with their fellow vloggers. The multimodal interactional analysis provided a detailed qualitative account of how they achieved this in YouTube’s video-based environment. The asynchronous nature of this medium presented challenges and opportunities for our vloggers in terms of how they related to one another and they had all developed techniques for enhancing their communicative opportunities.

A number of different *communicative modes* were employed by vloggers to reinstate many of the non-linguistic aspects of face to face interaction. This is in line with the findings of both Bavelas et al (1997) and Nardi (2005) who point to the importance of the ‘original’ embodied face-to-face experience in the ways that people simulate and transform communicative practices within mediated environments. In this study modes were coordinated in order to establish eye contact, turn taking, the sharing of embodied gestures, the sharing of understandings/common ground and negotiating simultaneous audiences. The modes used by individual vloggers varied from person to person but included: use of the physical setting or layout (arrangement of the room); manipulation of physical objects (arrangement or movement of objects in the field of view); body movement (postures, hand gestures, head movements, etc.); video production techniques (editing of footage, titles, recorded music or on-screen timers); speech and vocal gestures (spoken language, intonation, reading and/or

laughter) and other sounds (recorded music, recorded speech and/or noise from the surrounding environment). Interestingly the asynchrony of YouTube vlogging could have been used as an opportunity for reflection and rehearsal (as we see in email communication) but in this study a sense of spontaneity was maintained by vloggers in their responses. Asynchrony also led to the availability and awareness (by the vlog creator) of simultaneous audiences which allowed a number of different messages to be conveyed at once.

The visual medium of YouTube gives vloggers the opportunity to express certain aspects of their embodied presence to others and whilst the technology has a mediating influence (which translates active physical and emotional states into a two dimensional visual medium) it has certain advantages over text-based media for older people. The focus on non-linguistic content shifts the emphasis in communication away from interacting with the technology (i.e. typing on a keyboard) and towards a social and embodied performance. This performative emphasis is likely to make use of established social wisdom (Baltes and Smith, 1990) that older people already have.

The intergenerational nature of this particular YouTube multilogue is worth reflecting on as well. Intergenerational contact beyond the bonds of family has become more limited over the last century with a trend towards a more peer-centred society in which different generations become segregated from one another according to their chronological age (Chudacoff, 1989). Everyday meetings between the oldest and youngest generations within a community are now rare (Williams and Nussbaum, 2001; Vanderbeck, 2007) and opportunities to share experience and resources across generations in a face to face manner appear to be diminishing. YouTube vlogging can provide older people with an opportunity to re-engage with the younger generation.

Intergenerational research has shown that when contact does occur it tends to be initially plagued by mutually held negative stereotypes. Younger adults' tend to think of older people as being of ill health, asexual or impotent, unattractive, suffering from mental decline, being useless, isolated, lonely, poor and depressed (Palmore, 1990; Kastenbaum, 1997; Williams and Nussbaum, 2001). The communication that we see between Peter and his younger viewers on YouTube does not suffer from these stereotypes (Gonzalez and Kurniawan, 2008) and there are obvious efforts to establish common ground from both generations. Kaplan et al (2004) in their study of intergenerational initiatives suggest that "before intimacy can be established, there needs to be a period of communication that allows for safe and surface-level contact" (Kaplan et al, 2004, pp140). YouTube facilitates this kind of contact by allowing public access to vlogs. Peter's younger viewers are able to view and listen to him without necessarily engaging in a personal dialogue with him. This allows preconceptions of Peter based on his age to be undermined before they are given voice. When Peter's younger viewers do choose to respond to him by video it seems that they are not responding to a stereotype. The same of course goes for Peter.

7. Conclusion

Through the case study involving Geriatric1927 and his younger respondents, we have explored how video blogging via YouTube, primarily designed as a social broadcast medium, can be appropriated by people to conduct conversations and make social contact. Specifically we have identified various communicative modes that are used to re-create a sense of a conversational context despite a disconnected and ambiguous sense of the other. The fact that this conversation took place between an

80 year old and three much younger participants suggests that the multimodal interactions of Web 2.0 technologies such as YouTube represent an untapped resource for intergenerational initiatives aimed at re-engaging generations and that people are able to creatively construct effective communication even within the constraints of this medium. By understanding the ways in which vlogging can be appropriated, we can look for opportunities to more proactively facilitate and support this as a form of social engagement, e.g., through guidelines for how to use video blogging, through creating specific opportunities for more older and younger people to connect online such as via local initiatives, and through designing accessible tools that can make it easier for conversational partners to interweave their video contributions. These are the subject of our ongoing work.

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